

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2997

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, US, IS, EG

SUBJECT: ISRAELI ACTIONS IN GULF OF SUEZ: PRESS COVERAGE

REF: TEL AVIV 6163

1. SEPTEMBER 9 JERUSALEM POST CARRIED A FRONT-PAGE ARTICLE ENTITLED " RABIN SEES TOON ON OIL RIG ISSUE" REPORTING SEPT. 8 MEETING BETWEEN PRIME MINISTER RABIN AND AMBASSADOR TOON. ARTICLE QUOTED RADIO ISRAEL THAT THEY WERE "CLARIFYING THE ISSUE, NOT HAVING A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION ON IT." FOREIGN MINISTRY OFFICIAL CITED AS SAYING THAT THERE WAS NOTHING EXTRAORDINARY ABOUT THE MEETING AND THAT SUEZ GULF INCIDENTS HAD BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED BY THE PRESS. ARTICLE CONTINUES:

2. BEGIN TEXT: WHILE BOTH ISRAEL AND THE U.S. ARE ANXIOUS TO AVOID ANY MORE HEAD-ON CLASHES IN THE GULF, AND ARE BOTH SAID TO BE HOPEFUL OF A COMPROMISE, THE DETAILS ARE APPARENTLY STILL NOT IN SIGHT.

3. THE U.S. IS SAID TO BE CONSIDERING A SOLUTION OF A PRAGMATIC NATURE RATHER THAN ONE OF PRINCIPLE, WHEREBY EACH SIDE WOULD HAVE A DEGREE OF SATISFACTION BUT STILL
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GIVE WAY ON PART OF ITS CLAIMS. UNDER THIS PROPOSAL THE

OIL FIRM WOULD BE PERMITTED BY ISRAEL TO CROSS THE CONTROVERSIAL "MEDIAN LINE" INTO THE ISRAEL-CONTROLLED HALF OF THE GULF, BY A FEW HUNDRED METERS, BUT ONLY IN ORDER TO COMPLETE THE SERIES OF TESTS WHICH HAVE ALREADY COMMENCED. HOWEVER, AFTER PROSPECTING ENDED, EXPLOITATION WOULD NOT COMMENCE ON THE ISRAELI SIDE OF THE MEDIAN LINE, ALTHOUGH THERE WOULD BE NOTHING AGAINST THE BORE-HOLE BEING SUNK ON THE EGYPTIAN SIDE TO TAP OIL FROM FILEDS STRETCHING UNDER THE ISRAEL-CONTROLLED HALF, OR AGAINST A DIAGONAL BORE BEING DRILLED FROM THE EGYPTIAN-CONTROLLED SEABED.

4. ISRAEL WILL NATURALLY INSIST THAT NO EGYPTIONS ACCOMPANY THE TEST-RIG RAFTS ACROSS THE MEDIAN LINE, AND THAT NO NEW SERIES OF EXPLORATORY TESTS BE CARRIED OUT IN OTHER PARTS OF AMOCO'S CONCESSION AREA.

5. IN RAMAT GAN YESTERDAY, BEFORE HIS MEETING WITH THE AMBASSADOR, PRIME MINISTER SAID NO ISRAEL GOVERNMENT CLAIMED SOVEREIGNTY IN THE AREA "AND WE HOLD (THE AREA) AS LONG AS NO OTHER ARRANGEMENT IS FOUND." BUT ISRAEL CONTESTED EGYPT'S RIGHT TO ISSUE CONCESSIONS FOR WORK IN THE EASTERN HALF, IGNORING THE FACT ISRAEL CONTROLS THE PLACE DE FACTO, HE ADDED.

6. RABIN TOLD A MEETING OF HIGH SCHOOL PUPILS THAT ISRAELI NAVAL BOATS "ON THE BASIS OF A CABINER DECISION" PREVENTED AN AMERICAN OIL RIG FROM CROSSING THE MIDDLE LINE IN THE GULF OF SUEZ. THIS WAS "A SMALL INCIDENT BLOWN UP BY THE MEDIA INTO EXAGGERATED PROPORTIONS," HE SAID.

7. IN THE LAST NINE-AND-A-HALF YEARS ISRAEL USUALLY FOUND WAYS, THROUGH THE AMERICANS, TO SOLVE SUCH PROBLEMS, RABIN SAID. HE ADDED HE HOPED THIS PROBLEM COULD BE SOLVED, TOO, "WITHOUT A SIGNIFICANT DEPARTURE FROM WHAT HAS BEEN (THE PRACTICE) SO FAR. I HOPE WE'LL FIND A SOLUTION TO THIS PROBLEM...WITHOUT SETTING NEW PRECEDENTS FOR AMERICAN-EGYPTIAN PRESSURES," HE SAID.

8. THE PRIME MINISTER ALSO POINTED OUT THIS DISPUTE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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"DOES NOT INTERFERE WITH OUR ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE OIL IN THE AREAS UNDER OUR CONTROL." END TEXT.

9. SEPT. 8 MAARIV CARRIED A STORY SPECULATING THAT GOI WOULD ALLOW AMOCO TO DRILL EAST OF MEDIAN LINE. ON SEPT. 9 ANOTHER ACCOUNT CONTINUED THAT "ARRANGEMENTS WILL BE FOUND WITHIN NEXT FEW DAYS WHICH WILL SATISFY BOTH SIDES."

10. ON SEPT. 9 DAVAR REPORTED RABIN/TOON MEETING, SAYING THAT BOTH GOVERNMENTS WERE INCLINED TO LOWER TONE OF DISPUTE AND TO TRY TO FIND A COMPROMISE SOLUTION. ARTICLE ALSO SAID THAT A U.S. FORMULA WAS APPARENTLY DISCUSSED WHICH WOULD ENABLE CONTINUED DRILLING WITHOUT VIOLATING ISRAEL'S PRINCIPLE THAT ARMISTICE LINE PASSES THROUGH GULF OF SUEZ. STORY SAID THAT DISCUSSIONS ON ISSUE WOULD CONTINUE ON DIPLOMATIC LEVEL IN JERUSALEM AND WASHINGTON.

11. HAARETZ (GOLAN) CARRIED TENDENTIOUS ARTICLE SEPTEMBER 9 STATING INTER ALIA THAT: "THE ATTITUDE TO THE AFFAIR IS GENERALLY GRAVE IN JERUSALEM, BECAUSE IT IS REGARDED AS AN EGYPTIAN BID TO ESTABLISH FACTS WHICH ARE CONTRADICTORY TO THE INTERIM AGREEMENT, AND WITH U.S. SUPPORT. IT IS BELIEVED IN JERUSALEM THAT THE CONCESSION TO THE AMERICAN COMPANY WAS A DELIBERATE EGYPTIAN MOVE BASED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT ISRAEL WOULD WISH TO AVOID A CONFRONTATION WITH THE UNITED STATES. WHILE OFFICIAL ELEMENTS ARE OFFICIALLY SEEKING TO MINIMIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE, THEIR UNOFFICIAL REACTION IS ONE OF GREAT ANGER WITH THE UNITED STATES FOR THE INTERIM AGREEMENT.

12. "THE AMERICAN PROPOSAL IS THAT AT THIS POINT THE PARTIES DO NOT GO INTO THE LEGAL ASPECT OF WHETHER THE INTERIM AGREEMENT GIVES ISRAEL CONTROL OVER HALF OF THE SUEZ CANAL. ISRAEL, HOWEVER, WOULD ALLOW THE DRILLING ATTEMPTS AND THE QUESTION OF WHAT WOULD BE DONE WITH THE OIL, IS ANY IS FOUND, WOULD BE DISCUSSED AT A LATER DATE. JERUSALEM IS DISINCLINED TO RESPOND TO THE PROPOSAL FOR FEAR THAT IT MIGHT EITHER BE DIFFICULT OR EVEN IMPOSSIBLE TO GO BACK ON AN AGREEMENT FOR CONTINUED DRILLINGS. IT HAS BEEN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CONCLUDED IN JERUSALEM, HOWEVER, THAT THERE IS NO HURRY, AND IF A DECISION SHOULD BECOME NECESSARY, IT WOULD BE PASSED AT THE CABINET PLENARY, NEXT SUNDAY."

13. COMMENT: WE HAVE PROTESTED TO EVRON (MFA) ABOUT TODAY'S PRESS COVERAGE OF SUBJECT, PARTICULARLY ARTICLES IN POST AND HAARETZ. WE REFERRED TO U.S./ISRAELI AGREEMENT TO TONE DOWN PRESS TREATMENT AND NOTED THAT, AS HE KEW, THE U.S. HAS NOT YET ADVANCED AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS. EVRON SAID THAT BOTH STORIES WERE "RIDICULOUS AND PURE SPECULATION" AND CERTAINLY NOT BASED ON CONVERSATIONS WITH ANY RESPONSIBLE ISRAELI OFFICIALS. HE THOUGHT THAT OTHER PRESS COVERAGE HAD IN FACT BEEN LOW KEY AND FACTUAL. HE TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEPLORE THE "UNFORTUNATE" MARGALIT PIECE FROM WASHINGTON ON SEPTEMBER 7 WHICH, HE SAID, HAD SPARKED PRESS SPECULATION

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